

Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's *Community*, 1918-1945¹

***Cemre Aydoğan*²**

How did the concept of nation turn into a sacred union through lens of ordinary citizens in Germany? How does the degree of national belonging affect construction process of other identities? Why did the Germans voluntarily witness the Holocaust? Kühne's distinct essays aim to answer these questions in *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918-1945*. Kühne critically analyses collective spirit of the German society in the Interwar Period and the World War II, and locates their request for being part of a group, German nation or *Volksgemeinschaft* (p. 24), into a larger framework: "the Nazi utopia" (p. 150). Just after its publication, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918-1945* becomes a classic book in the Holocaust and genocide studies.

The book introduces the significance of "the Myth of Comradeship" (pp. 9-31) in order to demonstrate the landscape of the German society during the Second Reich, especially the years of the World War I. Kühne clearly discusses a dissonance in the German society in terms of the degree of national belonging among members of the nation. Different experiences about the WWI and its impacts on the people show why some people defended the importance of individualism, and others did not. The

¹ Thomas Kühne, New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 2010. Pp. 224, \$35.00, ISBN: 978-0-300-12186-5.

DOI: 10.17932/EJOSS.2021.023/ejoss_v01i1006

² Sapienza University of Rome

construction process of the German nation was bound up with the losses of the WWI including the military failures; therefore, the consecutive part of the book, “Fabricating the Male Bond” (pp. 32-54), centralizes a certain need for emancipation of masculinity to be able to demarcate physical borders of the German nation against both internal and external enemies. Gender binary has an important role in the purification of the German nation because innately-attached roles on gendered identities would also help to “other” the different segments of the society. Kühne also frames the women of *Volksgemeinschaft* as the watcher of the entire crimes of the Nazis (pp. 137-161). In other words, the women of the Nazi Germany generally voluntarily-witnessed the mass extermination, and they were also aware of their duties for the sake of their nation: being domesticated bodies who were respectful of the concept of wearing (Nazi) uniform.

Nazi elites conceptualized gender roles and in light with it, they planned the extermination of their enemies, the Jews, during the Interwar years. Further, Kühne argues that “the SS ideal hardness” (p. 62) makes a genocide possible and legitimate through the masculine, militant and totally loyal bodies to Hitler in part “Performing Genocidal Ethics Togetherness in Himmler’s Elite” (pp. 55-94). “Invention of the morality of immorality” (p. 63) is connected to the destructive results of the WWI; therefore, resentment of the past also legitimated the genocide for the Nazis in line with the ideas and doctrines of the Nazi elites. Moreover, the part “Spreading Complicity: Pleasure and Qualms in the Cynical Army” (pp. 95-136) clearly demonstrates that “physical destruction – mass death all around – did not demoralize social

productivity” (p. 136). In other words, the SS had no ethical code; thus, they were not critical of their lethal decisions, and life continued in the Nazi utopia.

While questioning the other identities and expressions of gender, such as masculinity and femininity, Kühne’s book gathers different sources - memories of individuals, former interviews, and official documents - together, and combines with the former literature on genocide and the modern German history. Kühne emphasizes the suppression of individual preferences, orientations, and rights for the sake of *Volksgemeinschaft* that was formulated by the Nazi elites for the Aryan race, and analyses the ethic of mass destruction among the Nazi soldiers (interchangeable with the SS) for purifying the Aryanism. Sacralization of the national cohesion led to a collective blindness in the German society, and every member of *Volksgemeinschaft* accepted their attached roles for the sake of groupism, and Kühne successfully traces the vital decisions and acts of the Nazis in *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler’s Community, 1918-1945* which shed light on the roots of fascist politics.